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by Benjamin Snow

During the 1960s, Adorno's "negative dialectics" became identified with the critical theory of the Frankfurt Institute, of which he had become the most illustrious member. Yet critical theory was never a fully articulated philosophy meaning the same thing for all the members of the Institute. It was more of a set of shared assumptions that distinguished their approach from bourgeois or "traditional" theory.<sup>1</sup> Within this common frame, the methodology of individual members could and did vary. Thus, the term critical theory lacks historical precision, referring generally to the Institute's theoretical orientation during the thirty-odd years of Max Horkheimer's directorship.

Although Adorno later clearly felt comfortable being called a "critical theorist," he first outlined the distinguishing characteristics of his own method seven years before he became a full-fledged Institute member. The occasion was the inaugural lecture marking his entry into the philosophy faculty of the University of Frankfurt, "The Actuality of Philosophy," which remained unpublished until after his death and appears in translation here. At the time (May 1931) Horkheimer had been the Institute's director for only a few months, and the new orientation in critical methodology that he brought to it was just beginning to take shape. Of course, even then Horkheimer's ideas had much in common with Adorno's, due to their close personal and intellectual friendship. They had both moved toward Marxism in the late 1920s but the impact of dialectical materialism led them in different directions. Horkheimer turned toward the social sciences, while Adorno, instead of joining his friend at the Institute, chose to accept an academic position.

The young Adorno saw himself as a philosopher and an artist,<sup>2</sup> not a social scientist, and he was then clearly more excited by the literary criticism of Walter Benjamin than by the empirical social research projects of the Frankfurt Institute. Nor was the Institute's evaluation of Adorno much more enthusiastic: it is worth noting that two articles which he submitted to the Institute journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, in the 1930s repeatedly

1. As Adorno noted, the term critical theory was "Horkheimer's phrasing." Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973) p. 197. Horkheimer had first outlined its distinguishing characteristics in his 1937 article on "Traditional and Critical Theory," now in his *Critical Theory*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 188-243.

2. As he later recalled in comparing himself to Horkheimer: "I, however, by background and early development, was an artist, musician, yet animated by an impulse to account for art and its possibility in the present, in which something objective also desired expression, the suspicion of the insufficiency of a naive aesthetic procedure in view of the tendencies of society." In Theodor W. Adorno, "Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer," *Die Zeit*, February 12, 1965, p. 32.

failed to pass the review board.<sup>3</sup> And, although the articles by Adorno which were accepted—"Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik" (1932) and "Ueber Jazz" (1936)—were of lasting importance to his intellectual development,<sup>4</sup> his major works of these years were the more strictly philosophical studies of Kierkegaard and Husserl. The themes of jazz and the social condition of music reflected the Institute's primary concern with the question of how *geistige* products functioned to support or challenge the *status quo*. This was something quite distinct from Adorno's self-prescribed task: fostering the liquidation of idealist philosophy.

Horkheimer believed as firmly as Adorno that bourgeois philosophy was in a state of decay,<sup>5</sup> but he seems to have concluded that if metaphysics were no longer possible, then the philosopher had to look to the social sciences in order to find truth. Although these sciences, in turn, needed a critical, speculative perspective, philosophy as a separate discipline was eliminated.<sup>6</sup> For Horkheimer, the problem of "the object" tended to dissolve into (Marxian) sociology, the problem of "the subject" into (Freudian) psychology,<sup>7</sup> and critical theory attempted to explain their interrelations. In his inaugural lecture as Institute director, he spoke of the dialectical interaction between theory and empirical research.<sup>8</sup>

Adorno, however, discerned a dialectical process *within philosophy itself*. Indeed, he had an almost Hegelian faith in the immanent logic of philosophy, in its historical development as the unfolding of truth, even if, in very un-

3. A study of Mannheim went through two revisions (1934 and 1937) yet never appeared in the journal—a third revision was finally published elsewhere. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Ueber Mannheims Wissenssoziologie" (1953), reprinted in *Prismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955). A 1937 article on Husserl, revised by Adorno in 1938, was never published, but copies of both drafts are to be found in Adorno's estate.

4. In the 1932 article and in the more than forty short pieces on music that he published in a variety of journals and newspapers during the thirties, Adorno laid the groundwork for an aesthetic philosophy whose formulation occupied him until his death. (The book manuscript, *Aesthetische Theorie*, was published posthumously in 1970 as vol. 7 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*.) This is not to suggest that the early music essays in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which contained elements of an aesthetic theory as well as a critical theory of mass culture, were insignificant compared with his book-length philosophical studies; the point is simply that whereas the Institute was more interested in a (philosophical) *sociology* of art, Adorno's primary concern was in a (sociological) *philosophy*—of aesthetics as well as of epistemology.

5. As he stated in 1932, the idealist premise, the identity of subject and object, "...has long since collapsed, and with it, the edifice of Hegelian philosophy....'Absolute' philosophy...is a thing of the past." (Horkheimer, "Hegel und das Problem der Metaphysik," *Festschrift für Carl Grünberg: Zum 70. Geburtstag* [Leipzig: Verlag von C.L. Hirschfeld, 1932], p. 192.)

6. Horkheimer's faith that the social sciences could answer the traditional questions of philosophy through empirical research was not something Adorno shared. Against this tendency, Adorno, as he later recalled, tried to "strengthen the anti-positivistic, speculative bent" of Horkheimer. (Theodor W. Adorno, "Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer," *op. cit.* p. 32.)

7. These two theories, he felt, provided "a formulation of the old [philosophical] questions more appropriate to the state of our present knowledge...." (Max Horkheimer, "Die gegensätzliche Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung" [1931], *Sozialphilosophische Studien: Aufsätze, Reden und Vorträge, 1930-1972*, ed. Werner Brede [Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972], p. 45.)

8. He advocated "...a continuous dialectical penetration and development between philosophical theory and the practice of the single scientific disciplines..." (*Ibid.*, p. 40.)

Hegelian fashion, he believed that truth critically challenged the course of history rather than merging with it. Convinced that social contradictions appeared within the material of philosophy in a mediated form and that the philosopher, like the artist, had to be "absolutely modern," grasping these contradictions in their most current and (in an age of disintegration) their most antagonistic manifestations, Adorno took up the struggles bequeathed by the preceding generation of philosophers. By placing himself within their ranks, he pressed the antinomies of their theories to the point where the dialectical negation of idealism might be achieved.<sup>9</sup> This challenge from within, on the basis of philosophy's own inherent, historically developed logic, in order to break out of bourgeois idealism and into revolutionary materialism was what Adorno meant by "immanent criticism" and it constituted the substance of his idea of a "logic of disintegration."

This program bound Adorno to Benjamin more than to Horkheimer. Although Horkheimer, too, claimed that if bourgeois theory were to be effectively challenged it had to be from "within," to him this meant simply that bourgeois theory could not be dismissed by merely adapting an external, anti-bourgeois metaphysics. Rather, one had to expose the gap between bourgeois theory and its own reality. In his essays Horkheimer confronted bourgeois concepts (of justice, reason, individualism) with the actuality of bourgeois society (its injustice, irrationalism, monopoly capitalism), pointed to the discrepancy between the potential affluence of present productive forces and the existing scarcity, and demonstrated that *Lebensphilosophie*, for example, betrayed its own intent of protest because, in functioning as a support for the societal *status quo*, it converged with the very positivism it attacked.<sup>10</sup> But unlike Adorno, Horkheimer did not get deeply involved in the technical controversies of contemporary philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Hence, although almost all his articles in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* during the 1930s were critiques of bourgeois philosophy, they were not themselves "philosophical" in the strict sense of the term. Keeping one foot outside the discipline, he traced themes and concepts descriptively through the history of the bourgeois era—his knowledge of history was far superior to Adorno's—so that their social function might be revealed.<sup>12</sup>

9. As he wrote in his inaugural speech: "Only an essentially undialectical philosophy, one which aims at ahistorical truth, could maintain that the old problems could simply be removed by forgetting them and starting fresh from the beginning. Only in the strictest dialectical communication with the most recent solution-attempts of philosophy and of philosophic terminology can a real change of philosophical consciousness prevail."

10. For an English summary of Horkheimer's writings of the early 1930s, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 44-65.

11. Horkheimer's prime concern was *Ideologiekritik*, i.e., how it was that (bourgeois) "views valid in themselves and theoretical and aesthetic works of undeniably high quality can in certain circumstances operate ideologically...." (Horkheimer, "Notes on Science and the Crisis" [1932], in *Critical Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.) Adorno, convinced as he was that the *social* invalidity of bourgeois thought was manifested *immanently*, would not have held that such thought could be "valid in itself;" at the same time, he believed that ideology, correctly interpreted, was the source of truth.

12. The distinction can be illustrated by comparing Adorno's critical analysis of the concept

Horkheimer thus moved between theory and society, pointing out corresponding structures in consciousness and reality in a manner similar to that of the early Lukács (and to Lukacs' teacher Wilhelm Dilthey, whose work Horkheimer appreciated).<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Adorno attempted quite literally to make the structure of bourgeois society visible in the very words of the bourgeois texts: dialectical exegesis, that was more *Sprachkritik* than *Ideologiekritik*, more critical interpretation than theory.<sup>14</sup>

The difference between Adorno's and Horkheimer's methods implied different grounds for determining a theory's validity. Horkheimer's arguments rested on principles of moral rectitude<sup>15</sup>—indeed, principles developed by the very bourgeois society that he was attacking. As he explained: "If we take seriously the ideas by which the bourgeoisie explains its own order—free exchange, free competition, harmony of interests, and so on—and if we follow them to their logical conclusion, they manifest their inner contradiction and therefore *their real opposition to the bourgeois order*."<sup>16</sup> The transcendent element of idealism which allowed a moral distinction between the is and the ought remained essential to Horkheimer despite his advocacy of empirical research. Adorno would later recall, "with you the primary thing was indignation over injustice," and he noted that Horkheimer was indebted to the Judaic ethics of his family as well as bourgeois enlightenment principles for this impulse.<sup>17</sup>

of history with two of Horkheimer's early essays. Adorno's approach, outlined in his 1932 speech to the *Kantgesellschaft* in Frankfurt (in Adorno, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, pp. 345-365), was to juxtapose the antithetical concepts of nature and history in such a way that neither was posited as the foundation of an affirmative philosophy of history. His argument was dialectical and polemical rather than descriptive. By contrast, in a 1930 essay, "Anfänge der bürgerlichen Geschichtsphilosophie," Horkheimer's approach was to outline the historical development of the bourgeois concept of history from Machiavelli to Vico and Hegel, identifying both its progressive and regressive elements with regard to their ideological function. His program for a theory of history, outlined in another speech delivered to the *Kantgesellschaft*, suggested that the problem, while formerly the concern of the metaphysician, could not best be dealt with by Marx's "scientific" theory and (Freudian) psychology. (See "Geschichte und Psychologie" [1932], reprinted in Max Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Alfred Schmidt [Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1968], vol. 1, pp. 9-30.)

13. His aim was "to point out the common structural characteristics of well known developments in modern history." (Max Horkheimer, "Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung," *Kritische Theorie*, *op.cit.*, vol. 2, p. 106.) For a discussion of Horkheimer's evaluation of Dilthey, his criticisms as well as the points of agreement, see Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-53.

14. Ricoeur's description of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche as practitioners of an art of interpreting as an "exercise in suspicion," a "hermeneutics of demystification," applies just as well to Adorno. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Dean Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 33.

15. When, for example, Horkheimer criticized the acceptance of what had historically evolved as "second nature," he was concerned not only that, as "a suprahistorical eternal category" it was in fact incorrect, but that, in regard to moral will, it was "a sign of contemptible weakness." In Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *op. cit.*, p. 210.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 215, italics added. Cf. also Max Horkheimer (alias Heinrich Regius), *Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland* (Zurich: Verlag Oprecht und Helbling, 1934), p. 193, where he writes: "The chasm between the moral standards which the Europeans have acknowledged since the advent of Christianity, and those which these Europeans in fact practice, is immeasurable."

17. Adorno, "Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer," *op. cit.*, p. 32.

If the impulse for Horkheimer's social criticism was an ethical, quasi-religious humanism, Adorno was primarily concerned with the problem of truth. For him, not issues of right or wrong, but judgments of true or false were the necessary ground for the validation of theory. In an era when metaphysics had lost all legitimacy, Adorno kept asking the metaphysical question; just as in an era which had proclaimed God dead, Horkheimer refused to dismiss the moral problem of good and evil.<sup>18</sup>

Adorno, the metaphysician with no faith in metaphysics; Horkheimer, the moralist with no belief in Divine Providence: to describe them thus may in fact express what separated their intellectual paths not only in the 1930s, but throughout their lives as well.<sup>19</sup> The difference accounts for Horkheimer's greater concern with the gap between "imputed" and empirical proletarian consciousness,<sup>20</sup> for he considered that in the modern era, moral praxis was necessary political praxis. Indeed, the failure of the proletariat to achieve revolutionary consciousness became the focus of the Institute's research during the first decade of Horkheimer's directorship,<sup>21</sup> whereas Adorno's overriding interest in the questions of the truth of theory or the validity of art as issues totally removed from the question of proletariat consciousness caused the very idea of a collective revolutionary subject to drop out of this theory.<sup>22</sup>

Still, the polarity between metaphysician and moralist should not be stressed too strongly, as it was never categorical. Their work was essentially complementary, and became increasingly so after 1938. Even if Adorno's

18. Adorno was still struggling with the question of the possibility of metaphysics in the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*. Cf. Horkheimer's statement in 1934: "I did not know how far metaphysicians are correct; perhaps there exists somewhere an especially compelling metaphysical system or fragment. But I do know that metaphysicians are usually only minimally impressed by that which torments and afflicts human beings." (Max Horkheimer, *Dämmerung*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.) Horkheimer's moral concern for physical suffering (of animals as well as human beings) as opposed to Adorno's more cerebral orientation is illustrated by Adorno's recollection: "Once you [Horkheimer] said to me that I perceived animals as human whereas you saw humans as animals. There is something to that." (Adorno, "Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer," p. 32.)

19. As Adorno wrote: "the tension between the poles from whence we came did not disappear, and grew to be fruitful for us." *Ibid.*

20. Here, as elsewhere, Horkheimer was closer to the early Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*. He viewed the intellectual's role to be the articulation of imputed class consciousness, although, like Adorno, he refused to sanction Party control of the intellectual's theoretical work. See Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *op. cit.*, pp. 221-224.

21. In his inaugural address as director he wrote: "the discussion concerning society crystallizes gradually and with increasing clarity around one question, namely the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individuals, and transformations in the cultural realm." In Horkheimer, "Die gegenwärtige Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung" (1931), *Sozialphilosophische Studien*, p. 43. The problem led Horkheimer, as it did Wilhelm Reich (see his *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* [Kopenhagen: Verlag für Sexualpolitik, 1933]), to merge Marxist social theory with Freudian psychology: "What needs to be examined is how the psychological mechanism evolved whereby it is possible for the tensions between social classes to remain latent, tensions which, due to the economic situation, press toward conflict." Horkheimer, "Geschichte und Psychologie" (1932), *Kritische Theorie*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 21.

22. Although neither saw theory as subservient to political praxis, for Adorno the relation between the two was more highly mediated, and developments in theory remained more self-contained.

original choice was to teach philosophy rather than to join Horkheimer's Institute, he acknowledged from the first the dependence of his kind of philosophy on the findings of social science research,<sup>23</sup> just as Horkheimer considered speculative theory indispensable to the process of research. One was doing sociological philosophy; the other, philosophical sociology. Moreover, Horkheimer shared Adorno's interest, if not his preoccupation, with the task of establishing a new ground for dialectical, materialist theory.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Adorno's correspondence makes it clear that hope of collaborating with Horkheimer on this task was one reason why Adorno finally decided in 1938<sup>25</sup> to join the Institute in the United States.

It is interesting that the description of critical theory which appeared in the Institute's journal in 1941 (in the first English issue) reflected Adorno's more rigorous conception of immanent criticism,<sup>26</sup> as well as a very Benjaminian notion of the inductive method of arriving at truth,<sup>27</sup> indications that the change in the Institute's theory at that time was much the result of a power shift following Adorno's arrival as it was a response to world events, while Adorno's own position remained remarkably consistent over time.<sup>28</sup>

This is not to suggest that Adorno had no new ideas after the age of thirty. The theme of domination which became central in his writings after 1940 was

23. In his 1931 speech, translated here, Adorno noted that philosophy would "...have to take its specific disciplinary material preponderantly from sociology...."

24. In a 1932 essay, Horkheimer, referring to the tasks philosophy had still to do, reflected the same spirit of philosophy which Adorno had articulated in his inaugural address the year before: "It is also fully possible to present the results of empirical research in such a way that the life of the objects comes to expression on all sides." (Horkheimer, "Hegel und das Problem der Metaphysik," in *Kritische Theorie*, *op.cit.*, vol. 2, p. 195.)

25. As he wrote Benjamin in June of that year: "Furthermore, the literary plans of Max and me are now taking on a very concrete form. It is as good as set that we will first of all write a long essay together on the new open-ended form of the dialectic. We are both totally full of the plan..." Letter, Adorno to Benjamin, June 8, 1938 (Frankfurt am Main, Adorno Estate). With the outbreak of war, however, this essay, part of a "proposed great materialistic logic," was put aside in favor of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the theme which more adequately expressed their shock at the barbarism of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. When Adorno finally wrote his essay on the new form of the dialectic in 1966 (*Negative Dialectics*), it was all by himself. Thus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was, in a sense, a preliminary study for *Negative Dialectics*, as a comprehensive analysis of the history of the Enlightenment and how it had run amok: one had to know what had gone wrong with Reason in order to redeem it.

26. "[O]wing to the fact the concept is to be formed under the aspect of the historical totality to which it pertains, sociology should be able to develop this changing [social] pattern from the very content of the concept instead of adding specific contents from without." In Max Horkheimer, "Notes on Institute Activities," *Studies in Social Science*, 9:1 (1941), p. 123.

27. The method was described as "inductive," not in the traditional sense of collecting individual experiences until they attained the weight of universal laws, but of seeking "the universal within the particular, not above or beyond it;" because "society is a 'system' in the material sense that every single social field or relation contains and reflects in various ways the whole itself." *Ibid.*

28. It should be noted that the mature Adorno was not uncritical of his own early efforts. In a note to the 1966 reprinting of his Kierkegaard study, he said that he now found the book too affirmative, too hopeful. In reprinting his early music essays he sometimes altered sections which seemed "inexcusably idealistic" (see, e.g., his note to *Moments Musicaux* [1964]). But it is still remarkable that Adorno could publish so many of his early essays alongside his mature works with little or no revision.

heavily indebted to the Institute's theoretical and empirical work during the 1930s on the problem of authority<sup>29</sup>—work which Adorno carried further in his contribution to *The Authoritarian Personality*. Nor did those ideas which remained constant in his theory emerge full-blown like Minerva out of his youthful head; one has the sense from his early writings that his formulation of concepts preceded his own full understanding of their potentialities. Only after years of working with them was he able to develop out of their abstract possibilities a full, concrete meaning.

The goal of transcending idealism by leading its concepts via their own immanent logic to the point of self-liquidation was one idea to which Adorno kept returning. As he wrote in the preface to *Negative Dialectics*: "To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity—this is what the author felt to be his task ever since he came to trust his own mental impulses."<sup>30</sup> This was the impetus for his major study on Husserl, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*,<sup>31</sup> and it was the task which he first proposed for philosophy in his inaugural lecture.

Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that Adorno may have had this latter document before him when he was writing the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, so great is the similarity of their philosophical intent.<sup>32</sup> "The Actuality of Philosophy" must be viewed therefore as a key document for introducing the most important concepts in Adorno's thought and of the "negative dialectics" into which his philosophy evolved.

29. *Studien über Autorität und Familie*, ed. Max Horkheimer (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1936). We may note, however, that criticism of the domination of nature was already explicit in Adorno's Kierkegaard study (written between 1928 and 1933), and that it played a role in his critique of Wagner, also written before Adorno joined the Institute, whereas in the year Adorno published his Kierkegaard book, Horkheimer could still write: "For true human freedom is not to be equated either with indeterminateness or with mere arbitrariness; instead, it is identical with the domination of nature within and without us through rational decision." In Max Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Voraussage in den Sozialwissenschaften" (1933), reprinted in Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie* vol. 1, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

30. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.

31. Written 1934-37, and revised and published in 1956.

32. In an editor's note to the first (posthumous) publication of the address, Tiedemann commented that this and several other early essays, "unusually programmatic for Adorno's thinking," introduced motifs and ideas which "anticipate something like a companion piece to *Negative Dialectics*." Rolf Tiedemann, "Editorische Nachbemerkung," in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, p. 383.

# THE ACTUALITY OF PHILOSOPHY\*

by Theodor W. Adorno

Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real. No justifying reason could rediscover itself in a reality whose order and form suppresses every claim to reason; only polemically does reason present itself to the knower as total reality, while only in traces and ruins is it prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality. Philosophy which presents reality as such today only veils reality and eternalizes its present condition. Prior to every answer, such a function is already implicit in the question—that question which today is called radical and which is really the least radical of all: the question of being (*Sein*) itself, as expressly formulated by the new ontological blueprints,<sup>1</sup> and as, despite all contradictions, fundamental to the idealist systems, now allegedly overcome. This question assumes as the possibility of its answer that being itself is appropriate to thought and available to it, that the idea of existing being (*des Seienden*) can be examined. The adequacy of thinking about being as a totality, however, has degenerated and consequently the idea of existing being has itself become impervious to questioning, for the idea could stand only over a round and closed reality as a star in clear transparency, and has now perhaps faded from view for all time, ever since the images of our life are guaranteed through history alone. The idea of being has become powerless in philosophy; it is nothing more than an empty form-principle whose archaic dignity helps to cover any content whatsoever. The fullness of the real, as totality, does not let itself be subsumed under the idea of being which might allocate meaning to it; nor can the idea of existing being be built up out of elements of reality. It [the idea of being] is lost for philosophy, and thereby its claim to the totality of the real is struck at its source.

The history of philosophy itself bears witness to this. The crisis of idealism comes at the same time as a crisis in philosophy's pretensions to totality. The *autonome ratio* [autonomous reason]—this was the thesis of every idealistic system—was supposed to be capable of developing the concept of reality, and

\*This speech was delivered by Adorno May 7, 1931, as his inaugural lecture to the philosophy faculty of the University of Frankfurt where he taught until 1933. The topic of Adorno's first seminar was Walter Benjamin's book, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (completed in 1925 and published in 1928), a study which Benjamin intended as his *Habilitationsschrift* but which was rejected by the academic establishment. Adorno's speech reflects strongly the influence of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study. It was to have been dedicated to Benjamin in published form, but the planned publication did not take place. The speech was found in Adorno's estate after his death and appears for the first time in vol. 1 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*.

1. Adorno is referring to Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), which by 1931 had made a significant impact within academic circles.

in fact, all reality, from out of itself. This thesis has disintegrated. The Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School, which labored most strenuously to gain the content of reality from logical categories, has indeed preserved its self-contained form as a system, but has thereby renounced every right over reality and has withdrawn into a formal region in which every determination of content is condemned to virtually the farthest point of an unending process. Within idealism, the position opposed to the Marburg School, Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie* with its psychologistic and irrationalist orientations, has admittedly maintained contact with the reality with which it deals, but in so doing has lost all claim to make sense out of the empirical world which presses in upon it, and becomes resigned to "the living" as a blind and unenlightened concept of nature which it vainly attempts to raise the unclear, illusory transcendence of the "more-than-life." The southwest-German School of Rickert, finally, which mediates between the extremes, purports that its "values" represent more concrete and applicable philosophical criteria than the ideas of the Marburg School, and has developed a method which sets empirical reality in relation, however questionable, to those values. But the locus and source of the values remains undetermined; they lie between logical necessity and psychological multiplicity somewhere, not binding within reality, not transparent within the mind, an ontology of appearances which is as little able to bear the question of value-from-whence as that of value-for-what. Working apart from the attempts at grand resolutions of idealist philosophy are the scientific philosophies, which give up from the beginning the basic idealist question regarding the constitution of reality and, still within the frame of a propadeutics of the separate, developed disciplines, grant validity only to the natural sciences, and thereby mean to possess secure ground in the given, be it the unity of consciousness (*Bewusstseinszusammenhang*), or be it the research of the separate disciplines. Losing contact with the historical problems of philosophy, they forgot that in every assumption their own statements are inextricably bound to historical problems and the history of those problems, and are not to be resolved independent of them.

Inserted into this situation is the effort of the philosophic spirit which is known to us in present day under the name of phenomenology: the effort, following the disintegration of the idealist systems and with the instrument of idealism, the *autonome ratio*, to gain a trans-subjective, binding order of being. It is the deepest paradox of all phenomenological intentions that, by means of the same categories produced by subjective, post-Cartesian thought, they strive to gain just that objectivity which these intentions originally opposed. It is thus no accident that phenomenology in Husserl took precisely its starting point from transcendental idealism, and the late products of phenomenology are all the less able to disavow this origin, the more they try to conceal it. It was the authentically productive and fruitful discovery of Husserl—more important than the externally more effective method of *Wesenschau* [essential intuition]—that he recognized in the meaning of the

concept of the non-deducible given (*unableitbaren Gegebenheit*), as developed by the positivist schools, the fundamental problem of the relationship between reason and reality. He rescued from psychology the concept of the originally given intuition, and in the development of the descriptive method of philosophy, he won back a certainty of limited analysis which had long been lost in the separate disciplines. But it cannot be denied—and the fact that Husserl expressed it so openly is proof of his great and clear honesty—that every one of the Husserlian analyses of the given rests on an implicit system of transcendental idealism, which Husserl ultimately formulated: that the "jurisdiction of reason" (*Rechtsrechnung der Vernunft*) remains the court of final appeal for the relation between reason and reality and that therefore all Husserlian descriptions belong to the domain of this reason. Husserl purified idealism from every excess of speculation and brought it up to the standard of the highest reality within its reach. But he didn't burst it [idealism] open. As with Cohen and Natorp, his domain is ruled by the autonomous mind, with the important difference, however, that he has renounced the claim of the productive power of mind, the Kantian and Fichtean spontaneity, and resigns himself, as only Kant himself had done, to take possession of the sphere of that which is adequately within his reach. The traditional interpretation of philosophical history of the last thirty years would like to understand this self-resignation of Husserlian phenomenology as its limitation, and views it as the beginning of a development which leads ultimately to the plan of working out just that order of being which in Husserl's description of the noetic-noematic relationship could be only formally laid out. I must explicitly contradict this interpretation. The transition to "material phenomenology" has only apparently succeeded, and at the price of that certainty of the findings which alone provided the legitimacy of the phenomenological method. If in Max Scheler's development the eternal, basic truths alternate in sudden changes, to be exiled finally into the powerlessness of transcendence, then one can certainly recognize the tirelessly questioning impulse of a thinking which takes part in truth only in moving from error to error. But Scheler's puzzling and disquieting development needs to be understood more rigorously than as the fate of an individual mind. On the contrary, it indicates that the transition of phenomenology from the formal-idealist to the material and objective region cannot succeed with continuity or total assurance, that instead the images of transhistorical truth, which at one time [Scheler's] philosophy projected so seductively onto the background of closed, Catholic theory, became confused and disintegrated as soon as they were sought for in just that reality, the comprehension of which was in fact precisely what constituted the program of "material phenomenology." Scheler's last change of direction appears to me to possess its authentic, exemplary validity in his recognition of the gap between the eternal ideas and reality, the overcoming of which led phenomenology to enter the material sphere, as itself material-metaphysical, and thus he abandoned reality to a blind impulse (*Drang*) with a relationship

to the heaven of ideas that is dark and problematic, and leaves room for only the weakest trace of hope. With Scheler, material phenomenology has dialectically revoked itself. Only the metaphysics of the impulse is left over from the ontological design; the only remaining eternity over which his philosophy has disposal is that of a boundless and uncontrolled dynamic. Viewed under the aspect of this self-revocation of phenomenology, Heidegger's theory also presents itself differently than is apparent from the pathos of the beginning which is responsible for its external effect.

With Heidegger, at least in his published writings, the question of objective ideas and objective being has been replaced by the subjective. The challenge of material ontology is reduced to the realm of subjectivity, within the depths of which it searches for what it was not able to locate in the open fullness of reality. It is thus no accident, in the philosophical-historical sense as well, that Heidegger falls back on precisely the latest plan for a subjective ontology produced by Western thinking: the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. But Kierkegaard's plan is irreparably shattered. No firmly grounded being has been able to reach Kierkegaard's restless, inner-subjective dialectic; the last depth which opened up to it was that of the despair into which subjectivity disintegrated, an objective despair which transformed the design of being within subjectivity into a design of hell. It knows of no other way to escape this hellish space than by a "leap" into transcendence which remains an inauthentic and empty act of thought, itself subjective, and which finds its highest determination in the paradox that here the subjective mind must sacrifice itself and retain belief instead, the contents of which, accidental for subjectivity, derive solely from the Biblical word. Only through the assumption of an essentially undialectical and historically pre-dialectical "ready at hand" (*zurhanden*) reality is Heidegger able to evade such a consequence. However, a leap and an undialectical negation (*Negat*) of subjective being is also Heidegger's ultimate justification, with the sole difference that the analysis of the "existing there" (*Vorfindlichen*), whereby Heidegger remains bound to phenomenology and breaks in principle with Kierkegaard's idealist speculation, avoids the transcendence of belief which is grasped spontaneously with the sacrifice of subjective mind, and instead recognizes solely the transcendence to a vitalist "thus being" (*Sosein*): in death. With Heidegger's metaphysics of death, phenomenology seals a development which Scheler already inaugurated with the theory of impulse. It cannot be concealed that phenomenology is on the verge of ending in precisely that vitalism against which it originally declared battle: the transcendence of death with Simmel is distinguished from Heidegger's solely in that it remains within psychological categories whereas Heidegger speaks in ontological ones. However, in the material itself, for example in the analysis of the anxiety phenomenon, it would be hard to find a sure way to distinguish them.

In accordance with this interpretation of the transition of phenomenology into vitalism, Heidegger could evade the second great threat to

phenomenological ontology, that posed by historicism, only by ontologizing time itself, i.e., putting it forth as that which constituted the essence of man whereby the effort of material phenomenology to discover the eternal in man paradoxically dissolved: as eternal, only temporality remained. The claims of phenomenology are satisfied only by those categories, from the absolute rule of which phenomenology wanted thought to be exempt: mere subjectivity and mere temporality. With the concept of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), which is set forth as the ultimate condition of man's being, life by itself becomes as blind and meaningless as only it was in *Lebensphilosophie*, and death is as incapable of allotting a positive meaning here as there. The claim to totality made by thought is thrown back upon thought itself, and it is finally shattered there too. All that is needed is an understanding of the narrowness of the Heideggerian existential categories of thrownness, anxiety, and death, which are in fact not able to banish the fullness of what is living, and the pure concept of "life" completely seizes the Heideggerian ontological blueprint. If appearances are not deceiving, then with this further development, phenomenological philosophy is preparing for its own final disintegration. For the second time, philosophy stands powerless before the question of being. It can no more describe being as free-standing and fundamental than it was able earlier to develop it from out of itself.

I have discussed the most recent history of philosophy, not for a general intellectual history orientation, but because only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy's actuality emerge precisely. And that simply means, after the failure of efforts for a grand and total philosophy: whether philosophy is itself at all actual. By "actuality" is understood not its vague "maturity" or immaturity on the basis of non-binding conceptions regarding the general intellectual situation, but much more: whether, after the failure of the last great efforts, there exists an adequacy between the philosophic questions and the possibility of their being answered at all; whether the authentic results of the recent history of these problems is the essential unanswerability of the cardinal philosophic questions. The question is in no way rhetorical, but should be taken very literally. Every philosophy which today does not depend on the security of current intellectual and social conditions, but instead upon truth, sees itself facing the problem of a liquidation of philosophy. The sciences, particularly the logical and mathematical sciences, have set about the liquidation of philosophy with an earnestness which hardly ever existed before. This earnestness is so significant because the separate sciences, including the mathematical natural sciences, have long since rid themselves of the naturalistic conceptual apparatus that, in the 19th century, made them inferior to idealist theories of knowledge, and they have totally annexed the contents of cognitive criticism. With the help of sharpened, critical, cognitive methods, the most advanced logic—I am thinking of the new Vienna School as it proceeded from Schlick, and is now carried on by Carnap and Dubislav in close connection with Russell and the logical analysts—is attempting to

keep all authentic, wider-reaching knowledge of experience in exclusive reserve, and tries to search for all propositions which in any way reach out beyond the circle of experience and its relativity, solely in tautologies, in analytical propositions. According to this, the Kantian question as to the constitution of *a priori* synthetic judgments would be utterly meaningless, because there is absolutely no such thing as this kind of judgment; every move beyond that which is verifiable by the power of experience is prevented; philosophy becomes solely an occasion for ordering and controlling the separate sciences, without being allowed to append anything essential from itself to their findings. Associated as complement and supplement to the ideal of such absolutely scientific philosophy—not, to be sure, for the Vienna School, but for every view which wants to defend philosophy from the claims of an exclusively scientific method—while in fact itself recognizing that this claim is a concept of philosophy as an art form, whose lack of binding force before truth is excelled only by its unfamiliarity with art and its own aesthetic inferiority. It would be better just to liquidate philosophy once and for all and dissolve it into the particular disciplines than to come to its aid with a poetic ideal which means nothing more than a poor ornamental cover for faulty thinking.

It must be said here that the thesis that all philosophic questioning in principle can be dissolved into that of the separate sciences is even today in no way so philosophically presuppositionless as it makes itself out to be. I would simply like to recall two problems which could not be mastered on the basis of this thesis. First, the problem of the meaning of the "given" itself, the fundamental category of all empiricism, which maintains the question of the accompanying subject, which in turn can only be answered historico-philosophically, because the subject of the given is not ahistorically identical and transcendental, but rather assumes changing and historically comprehensible forms. This problem is not even posed in the frame of empirio-criticism, including the most modern, but instead it naively accepts the Kantian point of departure. The other problem is familiar to it, but solved only arbitrarily and without any stringency. The problem of the unknown consciousness, the alien ego, can be made accessible for empirio-criticism only through analogy, composed subsequently on the basis of one's own experience, whereas in fact the empirio-critical method already necessarily assumes unknown consciousness in the language it has at its disposal. Solely by posing these problems, the theory of the Vienna School is drawn into precisely that philosophic continuity from which it wanted to distance itself. Yet that says nothing against the extraordinary importance of this School. I view its significance less in that it might have successfully converted philosophy into science than in that its rigorous formulation of the scientific in philosophy sharpens the contours of the contents of philosophy not subject to logic and the separate sciences. Philosophy will not be transformed into science, but under the pressure of the empiricist attack it will banish from itself all questioning which, as specifically scientific, belongs

of right to the separate sciences and clouds philosophic questioning. I do not mean to suggest that philosophy should give up or even slacken that contact with separate sciences which it has finally regained, and the attainment of which counts among the most fortunate results of the most recent intellectual history. Quite the contrary. Philosophy will be able to understand the material content and concretion of problems only within the present standing of the separate sciences. It will also not be allowed to raise itself above such sciences by accepting their "results" as finished and meditating upon them from a safe distance. Rather, philosophic problems will lie always, and in a certain sense irredeemably, locked within the most specific questions of the separate sciences. Philosophy distinguishes itself from science not by a higher level of generality, as the banal view still today assumes, nor through the abstraction of its categories nor through the nature of its materials. The central difference lies far more in that the separate sciences accept their findings, at least their final and deepest findings, as indestructible and static, whereas philosophy perceives the first finding which it lights upon as a sign that needs unriddling. Plainly put: the idea of science (*Wissenschaft*) is research; that of philosophy is interpretation. In this remains the great, perhaps the everlasting paradox: philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings. Thus it reaches so few "results." It must always begin anew and therefore cannot do without the least thread which earlier times have spun, and through which the lineature is perhaps completed which could transform the ciphers into a text.

It follows, then, that the idea of interpretation in no way coincides with the problem of "meaning," with which it is mostly confused. It just is not the task of philosophy to present such a meaning positively, to portray reality as "meaningful" and thereby justify it. Every such justification of that which exists is prohibited by the fragmentation in being itself. While our images of perceived reality may very well be *Gestalten*, the world in which we live is not; it is constituted differently than out of mere images of perception. The text which philosophy has to read is incomplete, contradictory and fragmentary, and much in it may be delivered up to blind demons; in fact perhaps the reading of it is our task precisely so that we, by reading, can better learn to recognize the demonic forces and to banish them. At the same time the idea of interpretation does not mean to suggest a second, a secret world which is to be opened up through an analysis of appearances. The dualism of the intelligible and the empirical, as was formulated by Kant and only from the post-Kantian perspective was attributed to Plato, whose heaven of ideas still lies undisguised and open to the mind—this dualism is better ascribed to the idea of research than that of interpretation—the idea of research, which assumes the reduction of the question to given and known elements where nothing

would seem necessary except the answer. He who interprets by searching behind the phenomenal world for a world-in-itself (*Welt an sich*) which forms its foundation and support, acts mistakenly like someone who wants to find in the riddle the reflection of a being which lies behind it, a being mirrored in the riddle, in which it is contained. Instead, the function of riddle-solving is to light up the riddle-*Gestalt* like lightning and to negate it (*aufzuheben*), not to persist behind the riddle and imitate it. Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time. Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears—so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images (*Bilder*), out of the isolated elements of reality, it negates (*aufhebt*) questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science,<sup>2</sup> a task to which philosophy always remains bound, because its power of illumination is not able to catch fire otherwise than on these solid questions. Here one can discover what appears as such an astounding and strange affinity existing between interpretive philosophy and that type of thinking which most strongly rejects the concept of the intentional, the meaningful: the thinking of materialism. Interpretation of the unintentional through a juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illumination of the real by the power of such interpretation is the program of every authentically materialist knowledge, a program to which the materialist procedure does all the more justice, the more it distances itself from every "meaning" of its objects and the less it relates itself to an implicit, quasi-religious meaning. For long ago, interpretation divorced itself from all questions of meaning or, in other words, the symbols of philosophy are decayed. If philosophy must learn to renounce the question of totality, then it implies that it must learn to do without the symbolic function, in which for a long time, at least in idealism, the particular appeared to represent the general. It must give up the great problems, the size of which once hoped to guarantee the totality, whereas today between the wide meshes of big questions, interpretation slips away. If true interpretation succeeds only through a juxtaposition of the smallest elements, then it no longer has a role in the great problems in the traditional sense, or only in the sense that it deposits within a concrete finding the total question which that finding previously seemed to represent symbolically.

2. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Berlin, 1929), pp. 9-44, especially pp. 21 and 23.

Construction out of small and unintentional elements thus counts among the basic assumptions of philosophic interpretation; turning to the "refuse of the physical world" (*Abhub der Erscheinungswelt*) which Freud proclaimed, has validity beyond the realm of psychoanalysis, just as the turning of progressive social philosophy to economics has validity not merely due to the empirical superiority of economics, but just as much because of the immanent requirements of philosophic interpretation itself. Should philosophy today ask about the absolute relationship between the thing-in-itself and appearance, or, to grasp a more current formulation, about simply the meaning of being, it would either remain formal and unbinding, or it would split itself into a multitude of possible and arbitrary world-view positions (*weltanschaulicher Standpunkte*).

Suppose, however—I give an example as a thought experiment, without suggesting its actual feasibility—suppose it were possible to group the elements of a social analysis in such a manner that the way they came together made a figure which certainly does not lie before us organically, but which must first be posited: the commodity structure. This would hardly solve the thing-in-itself problem, not even in the sense that somehow the social conditions might be revealed under which the thing-in-itself problem came into existence, as Lukács even thought the solution to be;<sup>3</sup> for the truth content of a problem is in principle different from the historical and psychological conditions out of which it grows. But it might be possible that, from a sufficient construction of the commodity structure, the thing-in-itself problem absolutely disappeared. Like a source of light, the historical figure of commodity and of exchange value may free the form of a reality, the hidden meaning of which remained closed to investigation of the thing-in-itself problem, because there is no hidden meaning which could be redeemable from its one-time and first-time historical appearance. I don't want to give any material statements here, but only point out the direction for what I perceive as the tasks of philosophic interpretation. But even simply the correct formulation of these tasks would establish several things concerning those questions of philosophic principle, the explicit expression of which I would like to avoid. Namely this: that the function which the traditional philosophic inquiry expected from meta-historical, symbolically meaningful ideas is accomplished by inner-historically constituted, non-symbolic ones. With this, however, the relationship between ontology and history would also be differently posited, in principle, without thereby allowing the device of ontologizing history as totality in the form of mere "historicity," whereby every specific tension between interpretation and the object would be lost, and merely a masked historicism would remain. Instead of this, according to my conception, history would no more be the place from which ideas arise, stand out independently and disappear again. On the contrary, the historical images (*geschichtliche Bilder*) would at the same time be themselves ideas, the configuration of which constituted unintentional truth (*intentionslose*

*Wahrheit*), rather than that truth appeared in history as intention.

But I break off the thought here: for nowhere are general statements more questionable than in a philosophy which wants to exclude abstract and general statements and requires them only in the necessity of transition. Instead, I would like to point out a second essential connection between interpretive philosophy and materialism. I said that the riddle's answer was not the "meaning" of the riddle in the sense that both could exist at the same time. The answer was contained within the riddle, and the riddle portrayed only its own appearance and contained the answer within itself as intention. Far more, the answer stands in strict antithesis to the riddle, needs to be constructed out of the riddle's elements, and destroys the riddle, which is not meaningful, but meaningless, as soon as the answer is decisively given to it. The movement which occurs in this process is executed in earnestness by materialism. Earnestness means here that the answer does not remain mistakenly in the closed area of knowledge, but that praxis is granted to it. The interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its [reality's] real change always follows promptly. The change-causing gesture of the riddle process—not its mere resolution as such—provides the image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access. Materialism has named this relationship with a name that is philosophically certified: dialectic. Only dialectically, it seems to me, is philosophic interpretation possible. When Marx reproached the philosophers, saying that they had only variously interpreted the world, and contraposed to them that the point was to change it, then the sentence receives its legitimacy not only out of political praxis, but also out of philosophic theory. Only in the annihilation of the question is the authenticity of philosophic interpretation first successfully proven, and mere thought by itself cannot accomplish this [authenticity]: therefore the annihilation of the question compels praxis. It is superfluous to separate out explicitly a conception of pragmatism, in which theory and praxis entwine with each other as they do in the dialectic.

I am clearly conscious of the impossibility of developing the program which I presented you—an impossibility which stems not only from the limits of time, but exists generally, because precisely as a program it does not allow itself to be worked out in completeness and generality. Nevertheless, I clearly see it as my duty to give you several suggestions. First: the idea of philosophic interpretation does not shrink back from that liquidation of philosophy which to me seems signalled by the collapse of the last philosophic claims to totality. For the strict exclusion of all ontological questions in the traditional sense, the avoidance of invariant general concepts, also perhaps the concept of man, the exclusion of every conception of a self-sufficient totality of mind (*Geist*), or of a self-contained "history of mind"; the concentration of philosophic questions on concrete inner-historical complexes from which they are not to be detached—these postulates indeed become extremely similar to a dissolution

3. Cf. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923).

of that which has long been called philosophy. Whereas (at least the official) contemporary philosophic thinking has long kept its distance from these demands, or in any case has attempted to assimilate them singly in a watered-down form, one of the first and most actual tasks would appear to be the radical criticism of the ruling philosophic thinking. I am not afraid of the reproach of unfruitful negativity—an expression which Gottfried Keller once characterized as a "gingerbread expression" (*Pfefferkuchenausdruck*). If philosophic interpretation can in fact only prosper dialectically, then the first dialectical point of attack is given by a philosophy which cultivates precisely those problems whose removal appears more pressingly necessary than the addition of a new answer to so many old ones. Only an essentially undialectical philosophy, one which aims at ahistorical truth, could maintain that the old problems could simply be removed by forgetting them and starting fresh from the beginning. In fact, the deception of beginning is precisely that which in Heidegger's philosophy comes under criticism first of all. Only in the strictest dialectical communication with the most recent solution-attempts of philosophy and of philosophic terminology can a real change in philosophic consciousness prevail. This communication will have to take its specific scientific material preponderantly from sociology and, as the interpretive grouping process demands, crystallize out the small, unintentional elements which are nonetheless still bound to philosophic material.

One of the most powerful academic philosophers of the present [Heidegger] is said to have answered the question of the relationship between philosophy and sociology somewhat like this: while the philosopher is like an architect who presents and develops the blueprint of a house, the sociologist is like the cat burglar who climbs the walls from outside and takes out what he can reach. I would be inclined to acknowledge the comparison and to interpret positively the function he gave sociology for philosophy. For the house, this big house, has long since decayed in its foundations and threatens not only to destroy all those inside it, but to cause all the things to vanish which are stored within it, much of which is irreplaceable. If the cat burglar steals these things, these singular, indeed often half-forgotten things, he does a good deed, provided that they are only rescued; he will scarcely hold onto them for long, since they are for him only of scant worth. Of course, the appreciation of sociology by philosophic interpretation requires some limitations. The point of interpretive philosophy is to construct keys, before which reality springs open. As to the size of the key categories, they are specially made to order. The old idealism chose categories too large; so they did not even come close to fitting the keyhole. Pure philosophic sociologism chooses them too small; the key indeed goes in, but the door doesn't open. A great number of sociologists carry nominalism so far that the concepts become too small to align the others with themselves, to enter with them into a constellation. What remains is a vast, inconsistent connection of simple this-here determinations, which scoffs at every cognitive ordering and in no way provides a

critical criterion. Thus, for example, the concept of class is nullified and replaced by countless descriptions of separate groups so that they can no longer be arranged into overlapping unities, although they in fact appear as such in empirical reality. Similarly, one of the most important concepts, that of ideology,<sup>4</sup> is robbed of its cutting edge by defining it formally as the arrangement of contents of consciousness in regard to particular groups, without allowing the question to arise any longer as to the truth or falsity of the contents themselves. This sociology classifies itself as a kind of general relativism, the generality of which can be no more recognized by philosophic interpretation than can any other generality, and for the correction of which philosophy possesses a sufficient means in the dialectical method.

In regard to the manipulation of conceptual material by philosophy, I speak purposely of grouping and trial arrangement, of constellation and construction. The historical images, which do not constitute the meaning of being (*Dasein*) but dissolve and resolve its questions are not simply self-given. They do not lie organically ready in history; not showing (*Schau* [Husserl]) or intuition is required to become aware of them. They are not magically sent by the gods to be taken in and venerated. Rather, they must be produced by human beings and are legitimated in the last analysis alone by the fact that reality crystalizes about them in striking conclusiveness (*Evidenz* [Husserl]). Here they divorce themselves centrally from the archaic, the mythic archetypes (*Urbilder*) which psychoanalysis lights upon, and which [Ludwig] Klages hopes to preserve as categories of our knowledge. Should they be equivalent to them in a hundred characteristics, they separate themselves at the point where those [archetypes] describe their fatalistic orbit in the heads of human beings. The historical images are manageable and comprehensible, instruments of human reason, even there where they seem to align themselves objectively, as magnetic centers of objective being. They are models, by means of which the *ratio*, examining and testing, approaches a reality which refuses to submit to laws, yet can imitate the pattern of the model every time, provided that pattern is imprinted correctly. One may see here an attempt to re-establish that old concept of philosophy which was formulated by Bacon and passionately contended around the time of Leibniz, a conception which idealism derided as a fad: that of the *ars inveniendi* [art of invention]. Every other conception of models would be gnostic and indefensible. But the *organon* of this *ars inveniendi* is fantasy. An exact fantasy; fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate. If the idea of philosophic interpretation which I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question.

4. Adorno is referring to Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (1929).

I know full well that many, perhaps most of you are not in agreement with what I am presenting here. Not only scientific thinking but, still more, fundamental ontology contradicts my conviction as to the current tasks of philosophy. But thinking which aims at relations with the object, and not at validity isolated in itself, is accustomed to prove its right to exist not by refuting the objections which are voiced against it and which consider themselves irrefutable, but by its fruitfulness, in the sense in which Goethe used the term. Nonetheless, may I still perhaps address a word to the most current objections, not as I have construed them, but as the representatives of fundamental ontology formulate them, and as they first led me to formulate the theory according to which, up until then, I had proceeded solely in the praxis of philosophic interpretation.

The central objection is that my conception, too, is based on a concept of man, a blueprint of Being (*Entwurf des Daseins*); only, out of blind anxiety before the power of history, I allegedly shrank from putting these invariants forth clearly and left them clouded; instead I bestowed upon historical facticity, or its arrangement, the power which actually belongs to the invariant, ontological first principles, practiced idolatry with historically produced being, destroyed in philosophy every permanent standard, sublimated it into an aesthetic picture game (*Bilderspiel*), and transformed the *prima philosophia* [philosophy of first principles] into essayism.

In response, I can relate to these objections only by admitting of their content, but I defend it as philosophically legitimate. I will not decide whether a particular conception of man and being lies at the base of my theory, but I do deny the necessity of resorting to this conception. It is an idealist demand, that of an absolute beginning, as only pure thought by itself can accomplish. It is a Cartesian demand, which believes it necessary to raise thinking to the form of its thought presuppositions and axioms. However, philosophy which no longer makes the assumption of autonomy, which no longer believes reality to be grounded in the *ratio*, but instead assumes always and forever that the law-giving of autonomous reason pierces through a being which is not adequate to it and cannot be laid out rationally as a totality—such a philosophy will not go the entire path to the rational presuppositions, but instead will stop there where irreducible reality breaks in upon it. If it proceeds further into the region of presuppositions, then it will be able to reach them only formally, and at the price of that reality in which its actual tasks are laid. The break-in of what is irreducible, however, occurs concrete-historically, and thus it is history which retards the movement of thought to its presuppositions. The productivity of thinking is able to prove itself only dialectically, in historical concreteness. Both thought and history come into communication within the models. Regarding efforts to achieve a form for such communication, I gladly put up with the reproach of essayism. The English empiricists called their philosophic writings essays, as did Leibniz, because the power of freshly disclosed reality, upon which their thinking struck, continuously forced upon them the risk of experimentation. Not until

the post-Kantian century was the risk of experimentation lost, along with the power of reality. Thus from a form of great philosophy the essay became an insignificant form of aesthetics, in which a concretion of interpretation nonetheless takes refuge as appearance (*Schein*), over which authentic philosophy, in the grand dimensions of its problems, has long since lost disposal.

If, with the disintegration of all security within great philosophy, experiment makes its entry; if it thereby ties onto the limited, contoured and unsymbolic interpretations of aesthetic essays, then that does not appear to be condemnable, provided that the objects are chosen correctly, that they are real. For the mind (*Geist*) is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality.

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